



Correctional Officers Norman Davis (left photo) and Austin Rhodes (right photo) were commended for their life-saving efforts by IDOC Director S.A. "Tony" Godinez at a statewide warden's meeting on July 17, 2013, in Springfield.

Pembroke man, co-worker save victims of fiery crash

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Photo credit: Robert Themer, Kankakee Daily Journal

Norman Davis, seen here at the gate of Davis Double D Ranch in Pembroke Township, and fellow Danville Correctional Center guard Austin Rhodes were honored Wednesday for saving three people from a fiery two-vehicle crash in June.

"The woman was ablaze. I don't know if she jumped off the tractor or fell off, but she was a human torch," Norman Davis, of Pembroke Township, said about a rural Hoopeston woman whose farm tractor was smashed by a semitruck on Illinois Route 1 about 7:30 a.m. June 11.

Davis, a guard at the Danville Correctional Center, and fellow guard Austin Rhodes, of Hoopeston, received rare commendations Wednesday from Illinois Department of Corrections Director S.A. Godinez for their life-saving response to the fiery crash.

Rhodes was following the semi, with Davis right behind him, all doing about 60 mph, when the semi hit the tractor as it was being turned left, two miles south of Hoopeston. The tractor was smashed into a concrete bridge railing and burst into flames, setting the driver on fire.

"Rhodes and I were out of our vehicles at the same time and running towards the woman," Davis said. "We got there and naturally started patting her to put the fire out." Their bare hands were all they had for the purpose.

While they sat briefly, trying to keep her awake, Davis spotted the semi driver under his cab, then pulled him to the side of the road and away from the fire.

Then he saw the hair of a young woman passenger in the semi cab, glass embedded in her face, barely conscious.

"I could feel the heat coming from the farm tractor," Davis said. "I grabbed her. I carried her like four or five steps and all of a sudden I just heard a 'FWOOOSSSH,' and I started really moving out."

Then, fearing the fuel tank of the semi would explode, he and Rhodes moved the three victims farther back.

"That truck melted down," Davis said. "Only the tank was left. We thought it would blow."

After they got the victims away from the immediate crash scene, "we actually saw a blue van come toward us and then turn around and leave," Davis said. "Then a nurse came from the north and helped. I don't know her name or where she was from."

An ambulance arrived after about 20 minutes.

The tractor driver, Wendy E. Gernand, 53, of rural Hoopeston, had to be airlifted for treatment at a Chicago area burn center, according to a Hoopeston Chronicle report. The semi driver, Roger Baldwin, 39, and his passenger, Maleesa A. Jones, 24, were treated at a Champaign hospital, then released. Baldwin was ticketed for improper passing.

Vermilion County sheriff's Sgt. Eric Deck wrote to Danville Warden Keith Anglin that Davis and Rhodes "saved the lives of these three persons."

They were named Danville prison employees of the month July 1, then honored in Springfield on Wednesday at a statewide meeting of wardens and other administrative staff. Godinez opened the meeting commending them and gave them a written citation, said Joseph Yurkovich, DOC chief of operations. "Then every warden rose to their feet and the rest of the corrections staff and gave them a very lengthy standing ovation."

Such honors are usually reserved for May "when we honor our fallen heroes and the corrections officer of the year," Yurkovich said.

God put him and Rhodes on the scene, said Davis, a minister of Victorious Life Christian Center in Hopkins Park and author of the recently revised autobiography "Born for God's Purpose."

Both formerly worked at Dwight Correctional Center, but transferred to Danville when Dwight closed April 1. Neither would have been on Route 1 at Hoopeston that morning, otherwise.

"My buddy and I just did what you're supposed to do," Davis said. "These people were hurt. We helped them.

"The amazing thing is he and I normally don't even leave at the same time," Davis said. "We're usually working in different parts of the prison. That night we worked in the same unit and left at the same time, me right behind him."



Photo: Submitted photo (No photo credit)

The remains of a burned semi cab from which Norman Evans, of Pembroke Township, pulled two people shortly before it ignited on June 11 near Hoopeston.